

# INDIANA UNIVERSITY

BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY

May 24, 1951

Dr. Joshua Lederberg  
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Madison 6, Wisconsin

Dear Joshua:

Your failure to hear further from Skaar is typical. He will say nothing unless he has something positive to report. The possibility that you might be interested in what has happened otherwise would never enter his mind. The fact is that he was turned down by Merck and will not hear from PHS until sometime near the end of June.

As to my judgment of Skaar's qualifications, you may be sure I'll let you have it straight and pull no punches. This, of course had to be done also in my letters to Merck and PHS. That is why I was not surprised at Merck and would be surprised if he gets the PHS. The simple truth is that Skaar has not done a good job for his thesis, so far as his research is concerned. That is the worst thing in his record. The rest is excellent. Moreover, I think you should not dismiss the possibility of offering him a research associateship until you have weighed carefully the whole story which I will try to set forth for you.

My group of graduate students and I work together as a whole, with beautiful give and take. This has been my chief way of giving them whatever "training and guidance" I can. It has succeeded admirably with all but a few students. Skaar is one of those with whom it has failed. He enters into our discussions practically not at all; he has contributed little to us and I am afraid we have contributed little to him. The ultimate basis for his status in the group is not completely evident to me. I believe a large part of it is his admirable desire to be completely independent and his natural resistance to direction in any form. In the long run, therefore, he may well outstrip the others who are more responsive and more stimulating. But in the meantime his research development has been greatly retarded. His ideas about how to design and execute experiments were in my opinion obviously faulty and impracticable from the start. But I could not convince him otherwise. Eventually - but too late to do his thesis any good - he learned this himself from bitter experience. Only his own experience or thinking convinces him and he learns these major lessons slowly.

On the other hand, Skaar has been consistently an A student. Muller, Cleland, Haurowitz and others who have had him in class all considered him intellectually outstanding. So did I, on the basis of class work. Moreover, he is interested in fundamentals, in the

philosophy of science and scientific method. In short he is very thoughtful and intellectually independent. He may well turn into a first rate investigator in time. But I am sure he needs new contacts for this; there is little I can give him. You would I believe have a good chance to accomplish what I have failed to do. For one thing, he is riper for this now and for another a change of scene would help.

Do not get the idea that Skaar is a personality problem. By no means. He is jolly and well-liked by all. He is merely introspective and not very communicative.

You can see why I don't expect him to get Fellowships. I simply can't say he's done a top job in research. And my faith that he has the makings of a good investigator would surely be considered too risky by an ordinary Fellowship Board. I really hope, however, that you can arrange things for him because he has stuff too good not to be encouraged and developed.

Cordially,

  
T. M. Sorneborn

TMS:jb